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ABSTRACT

In the neurological impress method the teacher sits slightly behind the child, a book is held jointly, and the teacher and child read aloud simultaneously with the teacher directing his/her voice into the child's ear as the child slides a finger along each line following the words as they are spoken. No attempt is made to teach sounds or word recognition skills or to question the child about the material read. The session is to be pleasant and not fatiguing. The method was first discussed by R. G. Heckelman in the 1960s and is similar to the Prime-O-Tec method developed by W. C. Jordan in that period. P. M. Hollingsworth adapted the technique for use with a multi-channel wireless language system where a tape is played and 10 children are able to read and follow along at once. Results of experiments with the neurological impress method, involving teachers, tutors and the wireless system, have been mixed. Subjective evidence offered by teachers involved with research studies on using the method is usually favorable. Heckelman believes that the method is one way of breaking word calling and gaining fluency in reading. A review of the studies on the neurological impress method suggests that more research on the technique is needed with special consideration given to selecting preferred treatment for individual students. (MKM)

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The Neurological-Impress Method of Teaching Reading

by Susan Partridge

It is a well-known fact that there are children who can read before they enter school for the first time. When parents have been queried about this, some have admitted reading to, and with, their children, but they have denied using any specific instructional means.

It is known too that some people learned to read many years ago, before the time of schools as we now know them. They probably learned by having someone, who could read, read to them, perhaps, from the Bible or some other treasured book. It is not unlikely that as a parent read, the children gathered around and looked over the parent's shoulder.

Recently several professional friends were asked about their learning to read. Some responded that they could not remember how they learned to read. Some did not recall receiving any instruction in phonics; others were convinced that they had not received any.

Dr. Arthur I. Gates, a prominent educator, known to many, not least among them reading teachers, whom he served well for many years, reported in "An Autobiography"[1], "My mother told me that I learned to read with a bit of help from her soon after my third birthday." It is believed that in some of Dr. Gates' writing and speaking, he referred

[1] National Society for the Study of Education Yearbook, 70 pt. 2, 189-217.

to her method as "homespun".

The above anecdotes might lend some credence to some of the accounts of success with what is referred to today as the neurological-impress method. These stories, found in reputable journals, might also lend support to the belief of some that it might be discovered that the neurological-impress method is more fundamental that other methods which have been used -- the look-say method, phonics, etc.

In the neurological-impress method, all of a child's senses are involved in the reading process. The teacher sits slightly behind the child; the book is held jointly; teacher and child read aloud simultaneously, with the teacher directing his/her voice into the child's ear; and the child slides his/her finger along each line, following the words as they are spoken. No attempt is made to teach sounds or word recognition skills or to question the child about the material read. In short, the session is to be pleasant, and the teacher must be carefully attuned to the student's uniqueness. Heckelman who has been referred to by some as "practically the founder of the neurological-impress method" offers much detail which a teacher might find helpful in this regard: when to increase the volume of his/her voice, when to decrease it, when to increase his/her speed of reading and when to decrease it. Other helpful hints are to note fatigue on the part of the child and to provide the necessary rest periods. Offering help as needed with the finger sliding, as in the case of a poorly-coordinated child,

for example, is another consideration given.

It was more than a quarter of a century ago when Heckelman created the method for use with an adolescent girl of good average intelligence referred to him as having extreme difficulty with reading. After twelve sessions, each an hour long and spanning a period of three months, the result was a three-grade-level improvement in her reading. Other remedial students referred to him subsequent to this time showed similar gains.

In 1962 Heckelman discussed the method with a number of educators in Merced County, California, and he demonstrated it for them as well. They were impressed, and expressed a desire to try it in a controlled experiment so that objective evaluation of the results could be possible. The twenty-four students in the experimental group all read three years or more below grade placement[2] and expectancy.

The mean gain in reading comprehension was 1.9 grade levels for a period of seven and one-fourth hours of treatment over a six-week period. The gains were found significant at both the .001 and .005 percent levels.

Needless to say, a likely objection by classroom teachers would be the one-to-one basis required in using the method. In 1970 Hollingsworth used the EFI Multi-Channel Wireless Language System, a system with which it is possible for a child to listen to a recording and his/her own voice at

[2]From beginning 7th to beginning 10th.

the same time. As the tape is played, the child reads aloud into the mike attached to his/her headset. The monitoring teacher plugs his/her headset into the child's receiving set to determine if he/she is reading along with the tape and if his/her finger is under the words being read. The teacher is able, under this system, to monitor ten children at the same time.

Results of the experiment showed no significant difference in reading achievement between the eight fourth grade normal readers who used the wireless and the matched controls who did not use it.

Hollingsworth felt that the results might have been different if the subjects had been remedial readers and if the sessions had been longer, so in 1977 he undertook another experiment in which both of these conditions were met. When the pre and posttest mean scores in comprehension were compared, it was found that the experimental groups made one year's growth during the semester, and the control group only .04 of a year's growth. He concluded that in this study the impress method was effective, and he added that the experimental groups seemed to enjoy the entire procedure as evidenced by their remarks.

In an experiment by Lorenz and Vockell using the neurological-impress method with learning disabled children, no significant differences were found between the reading gains of the experimental and control groups, nor were there any significant difference between the children with auditory

learning disabilities and the other learning disabled children.

In spite of this, much favorable subjective evidence was offered by the teachers concerned with the project. Positive attitudes on the part of the children, improvement in left to right progression and visual tracking ability, improved fluency and oral expression, and closer relationship between the teacher and child were among the teachers' favorable comments.

The teachers' favorable comment about the children's gain in fluency is comparable to a statement made by Heckelman in discussing the results of his experiment[3] with the twenty-four childrer. He felt that an oral neurological-impress method was one way of breaking the "phonics-bound" condition occurring in children who, in spite of intensive phonics training, have no fluidity in their reading. They seem to attack words separately, and have been referred to by some teachers as "word callers". Needless to say, comprehension, for these children is difficult, if at all possible.

Langford, Slade, and Barnett reported on the impress method as used successfully by Heckelman and others who replicated his experiment. They also reported on a technique "that has close parallels to the neurological-impress method." The technique, Prime-O-Tec, named and explained by Jordan who described his process as "a saturation seeing-

[3]Mentioned earlier in this report

hearing-speaking method of reading", and who reported some startling results with its use. They also reported on Hollingsworth's experiment with the eight fourth grade normal readers in which no significant gains were made. They stated that Hollingsworth's technique "appears identical to Jordan's Prime-O-Tec."

Following their reports on work done by others with the neurological-impress method in remedial reading, they offered several case studies from the British Columbia Youth Development Centre's school for emotionally disturbed and learning-disabled children. In the cases reported, though other reading activities were not excluded, the impress method constituted the major portion of these children's program. Gains were reported for each of the cases, and though the authors concluded that the neurological-impress method can be used with some students who are experiencing difficulty with reading, they expressed a need for an "enormous" amount of research in the area.

Gibb and Proctor reported an experiment using the neurological-impress method in a classroom setting. Their subjects were fourth, fifth, and sixth grade children of average intelligence who tested at least one year below grade level on the Stanford Achievement Test, Intermediate Level II, Form A.

The thirty-nine subjects were randomly assigned to three groups: a control group in which the children continued in their regular reading program; Treatment Group I

who received the impress method of instruction from volunteer mothers fifteen minutes each day for eight weeks; and Treatment Group II who received assistance with their regular reading materials from volunteer mothers for the same amount of time. The tutor variable was controlled by using the same mothers for both treatment groups.

The Stanford Achievement Test, Intermediate Level II, Form B, was used as the posttest immediately following the eight-week experiment. The average total reading gains follow:

Control Group, .45 grade level

Treatment Group I, .55 grade level

Treatment Group II, .15 grade level

The mothers serving as tutors reported a preference for the impress method as they did not have to be concerned with instructional tasks as they did in Treatment Group II. Their ease with the impress method may have transferred to the children, as the children in this group were more eager for instruction than those in Treatment Group II.

A careful observation of all the statistical data revealed greater differences within the groups than among them. The pre and posttest results showed that some children in each group made gains in their reading during the eight weeks and some in each group made little gain or did less well. When the groups were combined, greater gains were made in vocabulary and comprehension than in word study skills.

This seems to indicate that careful consideration of the students' weaknesses in relation to their responses to the treatments might indicate a preference for each method over another as far as specific skills are concerned --- vocabulary, comprehension and word study skills.

There seems to be anything but an abundance of studies dealing with the neurological-impress method of teaching reading, and some of the studies that are available seem to read as testimonials. However, on the basis of the studies reviewed and years of work in the field of reading instruction, some conclusions have been drawn while further high-quality research is awaited.

Conclusions

Though it is believed that some children may have learned to read through the neurological-impress method and that some disabled readers may have improved in their reading through its use, it is not recommended for wide use. Experience has taught that there is no best method for all children and that the uniqueness of each child should be the determining factor in selecting the way in which the child is helped to read and that it should also be the determining factor in the choice of a tutor for the child. Use of the impress method is not ruled out, however, for selective cases in which it is felt it might help and which have failed to respond to other methods. It is further felt that in the case of the severely disabled reader, it might be better to tutor on a one-to-one basis than to use the wireless system, for example, as did Hollingsworth. Again, experience has taught that with complex cases, nothing seems to take the place of the knowledgeable teacher with a strong humanitarian sense. This, of course, does not rule out the use of the wireless with cases where the indications are that it might help.

Implications

1. Use of the impress method is a possible consideration in selective cases such as those which have not responded to other methods. It might also be considered as a help in the case of the phonics-bound child.
2. Before undertaking the use of the impress method, teachers should thoroughly familiarize themselves with it.
3. Great care should be taken to select the right tutor for the right child.
4. Before using the wireless system as opposed to the one-to-one basis, the uniqueness of the students concerned should be given careful consideration.

Much more research of a high quality is needed.

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